



Georgia O'Keeffe
American, 1887 - 1986

Shell No. I

1928

oil on canvas

overall: 17.8 x 17.8 cm (7 x 7 in.)

framed: 20.3 x 20.3 x 3.3 cm (8 x 8 x 1 5/16 in.)

Inscription: on upper member of stretcher reverse: G. O Keeffe; on lower member of stretcher reverse: 1928; on right side of stretcher reverse: #21; by Alfred Stieglitz, except for "Coiled", across center reverse: 1928 / Georgia O'Keeffe (Coiled) / Shell No. 1 / Exhibition 1929; possibly by Alfred Stieglitz, across center reverse, within five-pointed star: OK; across center reverse: #21 / 1928.
Alfred Stieglitz Collection, Bequest of Georgia O'Keeffe 1987.58.7

ENTRY

Georgia O'Keeffe avidly collected seashells on her travels. Later in life she recalled, "Each shell was a beautiful world in itself," and "I have always enjoyed painting them—and even now, living in the desert, the sea comes back to me when I hold one to my ear." [1] In 1926 she painted a number of seashell subjects, culminating in seven paintings in a series titled *Shell and Old Shingle*.

O'Keeffe returned to the seashell motif in 1928 with three works, including *Shell No. 1*, all exhibited at the Intimate Gallery in New York in 1929. [2] The National Gallery's painting represents the chambered or pearly nautilus (*Nautilus pompilius*) set against a dark charcoal background. The nautilus is found in the deep tropical waters of the Indo-Pacific Ocean, so O'Keeffe likely bought the shell rather than finding it. This type of shell has long stimulated the imagination. It was the subject, for example, of Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem "The Chambered Nautilus" (1858). Because of the nautilus's harmonious spiral shape, images of the shell can evoke the perfection of nature or infinity.

O'Keeffe chose to represent the shell in a life-size painting measuring only seven by seven inches. The edges of her subject are barely contained by the borders of her canvas, resulting in a startlingly direct and striking representation despite the small size. The shadowy background, which softly blends with and overlaps the form of the shell at its bottom edge, may represent a studio cloth or even sand.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS *American Paintings, 1900–1945*

Photographer Edward Weston (American, 1886 - 1958) also explored the evocative potential of the nautilus shell around this time, creating images such as *Nautilus Shell* [fig. 1] and *Shell 1* (1927). [3] Both artists were likely attracted to the nautilus because of its symmetry and mystique, as well as its potential for abstraction.

O'Keeffe returned to the form of the nautilus repeatedly. The composition of *The Shell* [fig. 2], a charcoal drawing also in the collection of the National Gallery, resembles that of *Shell No. 1*, but the drawing measures over twice the size of the painting. *Red Hill and White Shell* (1938, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston) and the pastel *White Shell with Red* (1938, Art Institute of Chicago) both place a nautilus shell against a fiery desert landscape. A similar spiral configuration appears in her sculpture *Abstraction* (1946, Promised gift to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR). [4]

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Edward Weston, *Nautilus Shell*, 1927, photograph, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, New York. Image courtesy George Eastman Museum



fig. 2 Georgia O'Keeffe, *The Shell*, 1934, charcoal on laid paper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, From the Collection of Dorothy Braude Edinburg, 1978.38.1

NOTES

- [1] Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York, 1976), unpaginated text accompanying plate 79.
- [2] Barbara Buhler Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols. (New Haven, CT, 1999). The similarly titled *Shell 1* (private collection; Lynes no. 623) represents a mussel, and *Shell No. 2* (Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, NM; Lynes no. 624) represents a clam.
- [3] See Mike Weaver, "Curves in Art," in *EW 100: Centennial Essays in Honor of Edward Weston*, ed. Peter C. Bunnell and David Featherstone (Carmel, CA,

1986), 80–91.

- [4] Katherine Hoffman, *An Enduring Spirit: The Art of Georgia O'Keeffe* (Metuchen, NJ, 1984), 52, pointed out the relationship with the sculpture. *Abstraction*, first designed in 1946, exists in three different mediums and sizes that were cast in 1979/1980 in four editions; see Barbara Buhler Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Collections* (New York, 2007), 68, 70–71.
-

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The lightweight, plain-weave fabric support is attached to its original stretcher. The artist applied oil paint thinly and precisely over a commercially prepared white ground. Infrared reflectography revealed a more pronounced outlining of the circular form of the shell beneath the white paint. The painting is in excellent condition. The frame was made by George F. Of, O'Keeffe's framer. The surface is unvarnished.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

PROVENANCE

The artist; sold 1953 through (Downtown Gallery, New York) to private collection, New York; the artist [1887-1996], by unknown date; [1] her estate; bequest 1987 to NGA.

[1] Provenance from Barbara Buhler Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols., New Haven and London, 1999: 1:366.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1929 Georgia O'Keeffe: Paintings, 1928, The Intimate Gallery, New York, 1929, unnumbered.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1976 O'Keeffe, Georgia. *Georgia O'Keeffe*. New York, 1976: color pl. 79.
- 1988 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. Rev. ed. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1988: 176, repro.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 250, repro.
- 1999 Lynes, Barbara Buhler. *Georgia O'Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné*. 2 vols. New Haven and London, 1999: 1:366, no. 622, color repro.
- 2000 Kirsh, Andrea, and Rustin S. Levenson. *Seeing Through Paintings: Physical Examination in Art Historical Studies*. Materials and Meaning in the Fine Arts 1. New Haven, 2000: 264.
-

To cite: Robert Torchia, "Georgia O'Keeffe/*Shell No. I*/1928," *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/70183> (accessed September 27, 2024).